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THE MATERIAL OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: COMMENT AND CRITICISM¹

Professor Ballantine's article on "The Material of Religious Education" makes one envy the children of the future who will be privileged to study such a curriculum as he suggests. Great will be their advantage over us of the present generation. As they undertake the duties of maturity, they will feel at home in the real world of moral activities which they enter, and will know their own place and work in that world; while the most of us have had to explore that world and grope our way to our proper position in it, through effort slow and painful because hardly begun until the golden period of youth had passed.

That material of religious instruction should by no means be limited to the Bible follows inevitably from the fundamental truth that shines forth from so many portions of the Bible itself, namely, that God is in his world. If God was acting in the history of ancient Israel, if through Israel's great personalities he imparted spiritual life to that people, then he is acting today in the history of the United States, and through America's great men he is presenting to American youth the ideals which will uplift and ennoble them. To know the history of his own country is, for an American, far more important than to know the history of Israel; and it is better for him to study the lives of Washington and Lincoln than to try to put himself back into the times of Abraham and Moses. To understand the great moral movements of the present is worth more—since it is in the present that one's life must count for good or ill—than to have an acquaintance with events remote in time and place.

There is danger that the new interest in religious education may promote a practical Bibliolatry; and this may in part be laid at the door of the biblical scholars themselves, because they have such contagious enthusiasm in the prosecution of their special studies, and are presenting the results of their research in such enticing textbooks. President Harper, by his extraordinary teaching gift, made his pupils feel that the study of Hebrew was well-nigh the most important of pursuits; and he and others who have sought to encourage the study of the Bible have done their work so very well that one feels a real temptation to study nothing but the Bible. Thus the very excellence of modern biblical scholarship and the

¹ A symposium upon "The Material of Religious Education," by Rev. W. G. Ballantine, D.D., LL.D., in the *Biblical World*, February, 1906, pp. 112-17.

success which has rewarded the effort to popularize Bible study may, for the time, reinforce the unscholarly, but too popular, tradition that the Bible is all-sufficient for the purposes of religious education.

Clearly there are two underlying facts that should be recognized and borne in mind by those who choose the material for moral and spiritual instruction. The first is that the Bible is not homogeneous, Christian in all its parts, and fit from beginning to end to be used in training the young. A Sunday school may be truly a "Bible school," and yet not necessarily and always a school of Christianity. Whether it is the latter or not at a given time will depend on the portion of the Bible that is then being used. When pupils are required to go through the whole book in so many years—the ideal of the uniform lesson system—it is certain that much of their time is spent, not in learning to live a Christian life, but in obtaining a smattering of ancient history, some knowledge of primitive ways more or less barbarous and of various obsolete religious customs, and a contact with moral ideas long since antiquated, and with conceptions of God that Christianity repudiates. The Christian element in the Bible should be exalted and all else kept down in its proper place of inferiority. The second great guiding fact—more important still—is that the word of God is not limited to any volume; that there is a larger Bible, of nature and of humanity, to which God is ever adding new pages. From this larger Bible it is our right and our duty to draw freely material that shall direct and inspire in Christian living those who will come after us.

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The fundamental materials of religious instruction in the Sunday school include (1) the Bible, its great stories, its great, typical lives, its great teachings, together with the elements of critical appreciation of authors, styles, and forms, and enough geography and the like to give a sense of reality and, incidentally, opportunity for expression; (2) the church, enough of its history and doctrine to prepare for intelligent and loyal membership; (3) practical living, including missions, movements of prevention and reform—in a word, enlightened social service, past and present, in theory, in history, and in personal application. To these may be added, especially for young children, (4) nature stories, pictures, and manual activities, designed to develop the idea of God in a natural way.

Enrichment, expansion, and socialization are watchwords of modern

education. The more broadly and vitally the field of religious education is conceived, the more easily and efficiently will the work of instruction in any part of the field be accomplished.

Turning from guiding principles to the concrete suggestions of the article under review, I agree that the study of subject-matter in the Sunday school should be but sparingly hortatory and homiletic; that teaching should be sharply distinguished from preaching, and the latter confined to its own place. This for the reason, mainly, that moral judgments and taste are in these days—and most properly—based less upon biblical texts or passages, upon isolated instances, or even upon whole characters, unless these are taken in connection with their environment, than upon organized masses of experience and truth. The effective sanctions of morality are coming more and more to be physiological, psychical, social, spiritual. If a biblical text or instance coincides with these, it is accepted as confirmatory; if not, it is likely to be rejected or discounted as not applicable. What, then, is the use of studying the Bible? That, *when rightly studied*, it affords precisely those psychical, social, and spiritual sanctions which serve as a court of last resort. The expression “rightly studied” means among other things, *broadly* studied—studied, that is to say, in masses, in perspective, in long reaches of cause and effect, of character and inevitable consequence. If a textbook “giving the main facts of Hebrew History” were to be written in this way, it would be a valuable aid to teaching. I think, too, that a textbook containing “the choicest extracts of poetry, wisdom, and prophecy,” with aids to their understanding and appreciation, would be helpful. There is room, also, for new attempts at the selection and adaptation of stories and narratives.

I must emphatically dissent, however, from the view that “these four small books” should be “expressed in English as spoken today in America.” To do this would be to deprive the old stories of much of their unique charm and value. Is it not a precious thing that in the language of the English Bible we have a medium of expression that conveys, not merely the ideas, but the very atmosphere of antiquity and devotion? The self-estrangement (*Selbstentfremdung*) which is wisely regarded as indispensable to a child’s development can never come through modernized studies. “To begin with things nearest at hand” is but a half-truth. “For each stage what that stage calls for” is a safer dictum. And the needs of the child, at each stage, call for both that which is near at hand and also that which is remote from his hand, but for that reason all the nearer to his heart. “English as spoken today in America” is comparatively foreign to the inner life of boys and girls; but with the quaint, naïve,

concrete, poetical language of the *Boy's King Arthur* and the English Bible they are at home.

With the spirit of the suggestion "that a large place should be given to books that shall instruct and interest the growing youth in the ways in which good is now being done," I am in hearty accord. Such work is invaluable. I hardly think, however, that the responsibility for such work rests entirely on the Sunday school—it is largely within the legitimate province of the week-day school.

As for dealing with the "drink question" in Sunday schools, by the use of a textbook upon stimulants and narcotics, I think such means likely to be too negative and too narrow. The main burden of such teaching should rest on the common schools, where it will be done the more efficiently the less it is interfered with by well-meaning but misguided organizations and manipulators.

With the general positions of Dr. Ballantine's article, as I understand them, I heartily agree: the enrichment and expansion of the curriculum of religious education is inevitable; there should be a rigid exclusion of the relatively unimportant and the non-essential; the provision of suitable textbooks of the highest grade is imperatively demanded. Such books, by the way, must be made with consummate skill. They will cost considerably more than people are accustomed to pay for religious textbooks, but they will be worth incalculably more even than their cost.

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I am fully in accord with Dr. Ballantine that "the time has come for a revolution in religious education," and that the crux of the Sunday-school problem of today is "the question of material." I will go much farther, and assert confidently that the revolution is rapidly progressing, with every assurance of success.

In his argument no account is made of present-day conditions and the limited possibilities of the Sunday school within the brief period of not more than fifty half-hours during the whole year, and even these subject to numerous interruptions that hinder or destroy the accomplishment of progressive instruction. He also fails to take into account the personal limitations of the vast host of "teachers" who are practically unlearned, and untrained even in the simplest educational principles, who render voluntary service, often of the most primitive sort, to pupils whose absolute lack of home training, whose irregular attendance, and whose indifference cannot easily be remedied, whose attention cannot easily be compelled

except by a power that few possess, and whose school accommodations and class environment almost utterly preclude good and thorough work. Besides, he seems to regard the Sunday school as the one and only means whereby religious education of the young is to be effected, when there are other agencies with a like purpose.

It is quite true that "the main body of Sunday school workers show no consciousness that there is any large matter for investigation here." But the body is large indeed, and we must not expect it to move rapidly until conviction of need permeates it in its entirety. It will not be easy to overcome the inertia produced by generations of indulgence in low ideals, with inadequate conceptions of the greatness of the work.

The important initial effort must therefore be with those who direct the Sunday school and those who teach. Whether the designation be Sunday, or sabbath, or Bible school is immaterial; essentially there can be but one textbook, the practical value of which must depend largely on the quality and capacity of the man or woman who brings it into right relation with those who are being taught. If that book were supplanted, and the message of God through and by it were no longer made known, there would be irretrievable loss to humanity. No well-ordered school of today is without more or less of teaching, direct or indirect, concerning the development of the Christian church and the history of Christian nations. In addition, "the problems and activities of the religious life of today" are constantly presented in numerous ways and through numerous channels. The boys and girls of younger and older years are being taught by means of pulpit and press and public school and academy and college, by competent and experienced teachers who, if conscientious, will not ignore the applications of the Bible truth to individual daily life, but will keep pupils "face to face with 'God in his world.'" Following the method suggested by Professor Ballantine, a pupil might, under direction of a highly educated and thoroughly competent Sunday-school teacher, learn much of biology and kindred sciences, but at the end of fifteen years the Bible would have come to be of minimum account or value.

The "extra-biblical material" would necessarily be more than ever in evidence, and the intra-biblical would be submerged. The proposed "four small books, expressed in English as spoken today in America," would be a poor substitute for the whole Bible, notwithstanding its many alleged defects. The Old Testament and the New Testament may each be discounted in degree, and portions conceded to be unsuitable for immature minds, but the principles of law and life are therein enunciated, the wonderful charm of both remains, the simple truths necessary for salvation are

presented with such clearness that even a child can understand and benefit by them, and their exemplification in the matchless life of our Lord furnishes the divine pattern for human attainment.

The professor objects to "repetitions" of biblical material; but human life is a constant series of repetitions, and few, if any, great truths are fixed in mind by a single statement of them. He objects to "details of oriental geography, natural history, and social life;" but these are often absolutely essential to an understanding of utterances made under peculiar environment. He objects to suggestions growing out of "the small words and phrases of the passage;" but such a course is perfectly in order if thereby the life of the pupil may be rightly influenced. The practical lessons really based upon the teacher's observations of life will more surely than anything else find place in the heart and life of the taught, and be in perfect accord with some of Dr. Ballantine's own suggestions.

There is no occasion for pessimism with regard to the Sunday school. Never so largely as now has improvement in methods and teaching material been so much in evidence. Never so generally and rapidly as now have periodicals issued for Sunday schools been improving, in form as well as in matter. Never within a single decade have so many worthy and practical volumes for teachers and pupils been issued. Never so fully as now has the spirit of unity and co-operation been dominant, with determination to bring about the utmost advance. Never so strenuous as now has been the demand for more honest work by superintendents and teachers. Never so much as now have the best educational principles been adopted in a steadily increasing number of individual schools. Both the National Educational Association and the Religious Education Association have had noble part in producing this result. The International Sunday School Association might have worked more rapidly, but even as it is, the gain and the progress have been immense. Organized Sunday-school work holds a place today far beyond that of any period in the past. On every side are tokens and prophecies of better things to come. Wise and helpful suggestions from educators of large experience are welcomed, and methods are adopted that once were not regarded as practicable, or even suitable, for the Sunday school. I am confident that the future will surely be as much better than the present as the present is incomparably better than the past.

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